

BX
5133
S53u

A
A
0
0
0
0
0
9
3
7
2
9
2

Shaw

The use and office of reason in
matters of religion



THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

C. 6. 4 ——— 1
*The Use and Office, with some Instances
of the Weakness and Imperfection, of
Reason in Matters of Religion.*

A
S E R M O N

Preached at the
TRIENNIAL VISITATION

Of the Reverend
The DEAN and CHAPTER,
A T
The Cathedral Church of LICHFIELD,
O N

Saturday, April the 20th, 1765.

By THOMAS SHAW, M. A.
Late of QUEEN'S COLLEGE in OXFORD.

Published at the Request of the Dean, Preben-
daries, and Clergy.

O X F O R D :

At the CLARENDON-PRESS, MDCCLXV.
Sold by DANIEL PRINCE.

Also by JOHN RIVINGTON, in *St. Paul's Church-Yard,*
London.

Imprimatur,

J O. B R O W N E,

Vice-Can. Oxon.

June, 15. 1765.

BX

5133

5534

T O

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

HARRY Earl of STAMFORD.

My Lord,

AT the Time of writing, and delivering this Discourse, I little thought of it's Publication. But, moved as I am by the Request, which I esteem the command, of my Superiors, I beg Leave to introduce it into the World under your Lordship's Patronage;—not unmindful of it's Defects, and how much therefore it stands in need of that Candour in the Readers, which was happily experienced in the Hearers of it.

Whatever may be it's Fate, I rejoice in the Opportunity it affords me of paying the Tribute of a grateful Heart: a Heart filled with a warm and active

a 2

Senſe

Sense of the particular Favours which you have conferred upon me;—such as would argue me disingenuous, and altogether unworthy, to forget on any, or indeed not to mention on every, occasion.—Long, my Lord, very long may you live to your Family, to your Friends, and to your Country. May the Title of STAMFORD descend to late Posterity, with the Benevolence, the Generosity, and the Publick-spiritedness of it's present Possessor:—Virtues which add Lustre to the most shining Honours, and diffuse Blessings all around them! And that this Address too may be accepted as a Testimony of real Gratitude,—is the earnest Desire and sincere Wish of,

My Lord,

*Your Lordship's very much obliged,
and most faithful humble Servant,*

THOMAS SHAW.

*Dudley,
May 10. 1765.*



PROVERBS VIII. 12.

I Wisdom dwell with Prudence.

HOW hard is the Fate of Revelation, at once to encounter the Malevolence of Opposition, and to suffer by the Indiscretion of Zeal! Not open *Enemies* only, but not a Few, who *walk in the House of God*, esteeming themselves, and wishing others to esteem them, it's truest *Friends*, do it much *Dis honour*; and the latter of these by a well-meaning probably, but surely an ill-tempered Warmth, expose it, no less than the former, *to Scorn and Derision*.

Some are enamoured with the Faculty of Reason in Man, as if it was almost equal to the Power of Intuition in Angels; — and it's

A

Praise

Praise is ever in their Mouths. So clear, so bright is the Light of Nature, that *the Sun of Righteousness* needs not to *arise* upon them, either to discover the Path of Life, or to conduct their *Feet into the Way of Peace*. — Not so splendid is the Talent of Understanding in the Eye of Others. With these it's original Lustre is not only sullied and obscured, but utterly effaced : The primitive Vigour and Perception of the Mind not only enfeebled, but lost. Between it's Abode in the Body, and the Region of divine Knowledge, *there is a great Gulph fixed* : So that the vain Wretch, who presumes to advance towards the Palace of Wisdom, like the (a) Men of Sodom at the Entrance of the righteous Man's House, is struck with Blindness, and *wearies himself to find the Door*.

Errors both ! Human Reason is not so all-sufficient, as it appears through the flattering Medium of Pride, and Self-Conceit ; — nor is it so dark, and blind, as it is represented by the gloomy Religionist. It's Powers in their utmost Extent & Cultivation, do not supersede the Use, I may add, the Necessity of Revelation : Yet this glorious Superstructure is founded upon Reason, as a Rock ;

(a) Gen. 19. 11.

and

and however violently *the Winds and Waves beat upon it*, it here stands firm, and immovable. The Truth is: These noblest Gifts of God to Man support and illustrate each other, are most intimate Friends and Companions for ever inseparable. — *I Wisdom dwell with Prudence.*

Interpreting *Wisdom* here of *Religion*, and *Prudence* of *Understanding* in general, — from the Passage considered in this unrestrained Sense, I shall take Occasion to display the *Use*, and describe the *Province* of the latter in respect to the former; — yet not omitting such Instances of the Weakness, and Imperfection of Reason, as will evince the Dignity, and Excellence of a Revelation.

That there is a God, a Being infinitely perfect, who created the Universe, and presides over the Work of his Hands, is the fundamental Principle of all Religion. — Vain is every Hope, and every Fear, if there is not a sovereign Friend above to patronize the virtuous, and good; Objects (if their best Faculties do not deceive) Objects of Esteem, and Happiness; — nor a righteous Governor to punish the vicious and immoral; Vessels (if Conscience does not falsely divine) *Vessels of Dishonour, and Wrath, and fitted for Destruction*

tion. If Man can boast of no higher an Origin, than to be the Offspring of *Chance* ; if he stands in no more honourable a Relation, than to be the Slave of *Fate* ; alas ! in his best Estate, Anxiety is his Lot here, and Nothing, or he knows not What, his Portion hereafter. — But by what Way is he assured that he is the Creature of God, and a Subject of his Providence ? — By *Inspiration* ? That He, *in whom* all Spirits *live, and move, and have their Being*, may dart upon any of them such Rays of his Glory, as to remove the Occasion of any farther Enquiry, can be doubted by those alone, who would fix Limits to the divine Power. But that he should condescend *thus* to shew himself to the Sons of Men in their present State, is either Folly or Madness to expect, or pretend. — So likewise to urge a more *general Revelation*, before it is certain, that there is a Deity to reveal, is an Assumption of the Point, which wants Confirmation. Nay, if Miracles should be wrought to attest such a Revelation, the marvellous Works might indeed astonish ; — but would they convince Mankind, unless it were previously known, that his *moral Perfections* will not suffer other Spirits to delude weak, and fallible Mortals ? Or would it avail to dwell

dwell upon it's intrinsick Purity, and Excellence, till it appeared, that God *(a)* is *righteous in all his Ways, and holy in all his Works*; and that Nothing, unles's tending to the Advancement of Virtue, Piety, and Holiness can flow from him?

How then is the Foundation of Religion laid in the Hearts of Men? By the Light of *Nature*, and the Use of *Reason*; which with irresistible Perspicuity demonstrate, and ascertain the Existence, and Perfections of a God. As it is absurd to say, that Something may proceed from Nothing; so the Consequence is necessary, that there must be an eternal Cause of all Things. There is no Being, which offers itself to our Notice, so perfect, and independent, as to be capable of producing, or even of sustaining itself: So that the Machine of Nature, as it was contrived and made, so it is conducted and upheld by some mighty Hand, whose wonderful Formation and Disposition of Parts bespeak a most wise, and most powerful Artist. — When we look down upon the vegetable World, and are struck with the delicate Construction of Plants, and Flowers; how uniform each, and yet how various the several Tribes of them, together

(a) Psal. 145. 17.

with their Use, Pleasure, and Beauty: — When we rise from passive Matter, to breathing Animals, and survey the Organization of their Bodies; how distinguished the Species, and ordained to peculiar Offices subserving the general Good, inspired too, as it were, with instinctive Faculties proper, and commodious to them; how their Constitutions are adapted to their respective Elements, the genial *Hand* of Nature also every Moment *opening, and filling all Things living with Plenteousness*: — If, once more, Man turns his Eye upon himself, and views the exquisite Art, and peculiar Shape of his own Body, the Parts depending upon, and assisting each other, and constituting one beautiful Whole: and then contemplates the Fabrick of his Mind, how it perceives, compares, judges, wills, and reflects; it's Discernment of Good and Evil, how amiable the one, how deformed the other; — its Sense of Order and Harmony, — together with the Presages of Conscience, and the Thirst of Immortality: — Does *Reason* return silent from this Prospect of natural Miracles? — Silent a while in Admiration, and lost in Amazement, she at length breaks forth, and cries aloud — *(a) Who knoweth not in all*

(a) Job 12. 9.

these,

these, that the Hand of the Lord hath wrought this, in whose Hand is the Soul of every living Thing, and the Breath of all Mankind? —

Thus the common, but most stupendous Scene of Nature bears as strong and illustrious a Testimony of a Divine Agency, as could be given by any extraordinary Interpositions to establish such a Revelation, as is before supposed. Should a putrifying Lazarus be recalled from the Grave; — or should the mouldered Bodies of those, who have slept for Ages, awake, and *arise*, from their Beds of Dust, — would such preternatural Effects require a greater Profusion of Skill, and Power, than to inspire the breathless Clay of Adam with *a living Soul*, or to cause *(a) the Bones to grow in the Womb of her, that is with Child?* — Or should the Sun be darkened in it's meridian Brightness, or be stopped (humanly, not philosophically speaking) be stopped, when *like a Giant running it's Course* in the midst of Heaven; — would these Phenomena more plainly argue an omnipotent Arm, than in the Beginning to kindle the Beams of this great Light, *and* give Motion to the vast Body, — ordaining it to brighten distant Worlds, and scatter it's Rays on this our Earth, to ani-

(a) Eccl. 11. 5.

mate the Face of Nature, and display the Beauties of Creation. — However therefore Miracles may proclaim the Authority of God, yet the People not favoured with Prodigies, even the most barbarous, and uncivilized Nations, have upon sure Principles concurred in the Acknowledgment of a Deity from his many wonderful Operations upon the Earth, and from those glorious Orbs, *the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars of Light*; which, unintelligent themselves, serve the Purposes of a most consummate Wisdom, *dividing the Day from the Night, and bringing about Winter, and Summer, Seed Time, and Harvest*. Hence St. Paul declares, that *(a)* God never left himself without Witness; but that *the invisible Things of him from the Creation of the World are clearly seen, being understood by the Things, that are made, even his eternal Power, and Godhead*.

Thus Nature itself discovers, that Man does not live in a fatherless World, but is the Child of Him, who *(b)* is mighty in Strength, and Wisdom, and whose *(c)* tender Mercy is over all his Works. — Gratitude, and Interest . conspire in prompting him to give Thanks for every Expression of Kindness, to implore

(a) Acts 14. 17. (b) Job 36. 5. (c) Psal. 145. 9.
the

the Supply of present, and future Wants, and to obtain his Favour (the only Means of Glory and Happiness) by all possible Instances of Duty; that so, when God *taketh away his Breath* at the End of a Life spent according to his Will, the pious Son may be translated to a *better Inheritance*. — Now from the *paternal* Goodness of God it may be presumed, that he would not leave his Creatures to the hard (if possible) Task of deducing by their natural Abilities a perfect and efficacious Rule of Life; but would favour them with one by a divine Revelation. But, as an Impostor may usurp an heavenly Authority, and cheat the World with *lying Wonders*; how shall they discern between Truth, and Fraud, and distinguish the Prophet from the Deceiver? Ask Reason. — No sooner is the Messenger said to descend from Heaven, but she modestly examines his Credentials, and considers his Claims; assured, that a blind Credulity is the Source of endless Error, is no Virtue, and merits no Praise.

First, if the Message itself does not coincide with the natural Idea of the divine Attributes, if (*a*) *the Commandment is not holy, just, and good*; Reason not only suspends Assent,

(*a*) Rom. 7. 12.

B

but

but without Hesitation concludes, that *(a)* *there is a Lie in his right Hand.* Or if it contains any thing impossible in itself, or contrary to any certain Truth, whether perceived by the Senses, self evident, or fairly inferred; it cannot be the Embassy of Heaven. The Representation of the same Thing, as true, and false at the same Time, — true, as it appears to Sense in Nature, and false, as it is offered to Faith in Religion; — is repugnant to that Consistency, and Harmony, which unite so strongly in all the Creator's Works. Such Contradiction *belongeth not unto God:* Nor can *an Angel from Heaven* induce a Belief of a manifest Falshood.

But if the Message is not unworthy of the Divine Nature, and approves itself to the Conscience of Man, it is then a fair Presumption, yet not an absolute Certainty, that God has sent it. But farther, if to excellent Precepts the extraordinary Attestation of *Miracles* is annexed; Reason *with all Readiness of Mind* receives it, as *the Word of God*; and the Prophet, as a *Man of God.* — The general Course of Nature rolls along with admirable Exactness, and Regularity; a Series of Causes acting uniformly, and producing a

(a) *Isai.* 44. 20.

constant Series of Effects. This established Order can be interrupted only by the Power, or Permission of God. In Him, according to our natural Conceptions of the Rectitude and Perfection of his Nature, Mercy, and Truth are essentially inherent: And therefore Immutability must change, before He himself can, or will permit inferior Spirits to work Miracles in Confirmation of a Prophet, whom He has not sent; unless He empowers his Creatures to discover the Cheat, and detect the Impostor. So that a Teacher from God, by performing Works plainly supernatural, repeatedly and publickly, by curing inveterate Diseases with a Word, and raising the Dead; — and if farther, after laying down his own Life in Assurance of his high Pretensions, he should restore it to himself; — by these extraordinary Effects he exhibits a claim to a divine Commission incontestable, an Evidence only not irresistible. — That God should use, or grant his Power to deceive the World, is a blasphemous Supposition: And it is a gross Absurdity to imagine, that the Devil, or his Angels should maintain the Cause of Virtue, and aid in the Subversion of their own Kingdom.

In after-Times when *Miracles are ceased*, and the Report of them is conveyed to the Mind, not through Sense, but by Testimony; — The Skill, and Fidelity of the Historians, with the Genuineness of their Accounts, will be Subjects of rational Enquiry. In the Days of the Prophet, Men being competent Judges of what they *see with their Eyes*, or *hear with their Ears*, will be at once determined in their Opinion. But *Posterity* will not *praise their Saying*, nor build a Faith upon it, unless persuaded, that the Testifiers of the surprising Facts were Men of sound Heads, and upright Hearts, neither deluded as Enthusiasts, nor seducing as Impostors; — and that their Records carry plain Marks of Credibility, — such as, being published, when, if false, Confutation was easy, and yet not confuted, though in the hands of subtle, and violent Opponents, — acknowledged by the Authors, received by their Followers, and allowed too by Adversaries, — dispersed in great Numbers, and into different Regions, so as to cut off all Opportunity of mangling, or destroying the Originals, and substituting Forgeries, — and moreover distinguished by the Air of the Times, in which they are supposed to be penned, and corresponding in the
several

several Passages alluded to, or quoted by contemporary, and succeeding Writers. — Here then I would observe, that Reason recommends, and approves the Institution of Jesus, as a Revelation from Heaven. His Precepts are entirely divine: — The mighty *(a) Works, which he did, bear Witness of him, that the Father hath sent him: — The mighty Works, which if he did not, and the Evangelists were either deceived, or meant to deceive; — even the Sense of Multitudes had lost it's Discernment, and the venerable History of Antiquity is but solemn Romance.*

Especially too, as *comparing* this with the former Declarations of the Divine Will, (the farther Office of Reason) there is a mutual Reference to each other; and it explains, improves, and completes, whatever *(b) God at sundry Times, and in divers Manners spake in Times past by the Prophets, whose Laws, and Predictions he came most eminently to (c) fulfil. — Thus (d) Wisdom is justified of all her Children.* The Characters of the Messiah are fairly applicable, and therefore were applied by the Disciples of Jesus to the Person of their Master. Just before the first Martyr expired,

(a) John 5. 36. *(b)* Heb. 1. 1. *(c)* Mat. 5. 17.
(d) Luke 7. 35.

he was discoursing to this Effect. (a) *The eloquent* (b) *Apollos, mighty in the Scriptures,* by them *convinced the Jews.* And (c) frequent are the Reasonings of the Apostles, that *Jesus was the Christ* foretold by the Prophets.

A Revelation thus deriving it's Origin from Heaven, and given to be the Standard of Faith, and Obedience, is not left to be corrupted by the Figments of Tradition, but, as it has been suggested, is consigned to Writing; that so it may appear in it's Purity, and Simplicity to remotest Ages. Reason then does not yet become useless. The *Sense* of this holy Book, like that of others, is to be investigated by the Understanding. — Not but that every ingenuous Mind, as Need requires, may expect a superior Aid to quicken it's Perceptions in the discovery of Truth; cooperating with it's Motions, and helping it's Infirmities, but neither thrusting Reason from it's Station, nor intruding upon the free Agency of Man. It is a Frenzy to expect, that God should *open our Eyes*, that we (d) *may see the wondrous Things of his Law*, unless, during some Portions of our Time, we *study in it.*

(a) Acts 7. (b) --- 18. 24, &c. (c) --- 3. 18. --- 10. 43. --- 26. 22, 23, &c. (d) Pf. 119. 18.

And whenever we take the sacred Pages in our Hands, the same useful Guide directs us, in order to attain the genuine Signification, to admit no private Interpretation in Opposition to the whole revealed Will of God ; — to keep in view the particular Aim of the Speaker, or Writer, — together with the Modes, and Customs of the Age, and Country, and his special Applications to the People, to which he is addressing himself ; — to consider the Forms of Speech peculiar to every Language, and to check the Flights of Figures ; — to explain Passages difficult, or obscure, by others more easy and less ambiguous, and to preserve the Coherence of the principal Parts, like the Pillars of a magnificent Temple, strong, regular, and beautiful. — Through Inattention to these Dictates of Reason, — how have *the Words of Truth, and Soberness* been misinterpreted, and wrested to the Purposes of Error, Confusion, and Destruction ! Some, it is to be feared, from hence renouncing the Faith, whilst Others have been establishing such Principles, as contradict our clearest Notions, undermining that Morality, which hath immoveable Foundations, and defeating the main End, for which

our

our Saviour came into the World, which was to *(a)* *destroy the Works of the Devil.*

With the utmost Propriety therefore do the Scriptures themselves allow, and encourage a free, and unprejudiced Use of the Understanding in Matters of Religion. Some Passages have indeed been appealed to, as opposing such a Practice. But those very Passages shew, how Scripture may be misunderstood by injudicious, or perverted by ill-minded Men ; — since taken with the Context they declare only against the Abuse, or the Pride, not the sober Use of Reason. This is inculcated in Terms, and recommended in a Manner, One would think, incapable of Torture or Resistance. Not to mention our Lord's Injunction to his Disciples, — *(b)* *Be ye wise as Serpents ;* — nor his Reproof of them, — *(c)* *How is it, that ye do not understand ?* with other Places, in which the Exercise of Reason is implied, and enforced ; — let it suffice to observe, that the Apostle, who preached the Word of God to the Inhabitants of Berea, whose Praise is recorded, because *they (d)* *searched the Scriptures,* and who *(e)* *reasoned in the Synagogue every Sabbath, per-*

(a) 1 John 3. 8. *(b)* Mat. 10. 16. *(c)* --- 16. 11.
(d) Acts 17. 11. *(e)* --- 18. 4.

suading the Jews, and the Greeks,—tells his Corinthians, that he (c) speaks as unto wise Men, and bids them judge what he said; exhorting them, in another Epistle, to (d) examine themselves, whether they were in the Faith. He advises the Ephesians (e) not to be unwise, but understanding what the Will of the Lord is;—and the Thessalonians to (f) prove all Things. So likewise St. Peter enjoins a (g) Readiness to give an Answer to every Man, who asketh a Reason of the Christian Hope: And St. John instructs us (h) to try the Spirits, whether they be of God, lest by believing every Spirit we be seduced by the many false Prophets, which are gone out into the World.

Still, after all our Endeavours, we must not expect to master every Difficulty. The various Explications of those Interpreters, who lived in the earliest Ages after the Apostles, confirm, that there are *some Things hard to be understood*, and of doubtful Import, which cannot be supposed to be more easy, or more clear to us, who live at this Distance of Time, and Place. And where

(c) 1 Cor. 10. 15. (d) 2 Cor. 13. 5. (e) Eph. 5. 17.
 (f) 1 Thess. 5. 21. (g) 1 Pet. 3. 15.
 (h) 1 John 4. 1.

the Letter of Scripture is plain, and it's Meaning obvious; yet some such Articles are there contained, as overpower the Comprehension of Human Intellect, and baffle it's most laboured Application: Articles disclosed, not to excite Curiosity, or raise Wonder only, but to exercise Faith, and serve the Purposes of Religion;—though the most improved Powers of Man can neither account for, nor explore the Manner of them.—What a wonderful Analogy displays itself in the Works and Ways of God!—That *(i)* *all Things were made by Him, and that without Him was not any Thing made that was made*, is the Voice of universal Nature. Yet, Creation! who can understand it? Or, who can penetrate beyond the Surface into the internal Essence even of the least Particle of Matter, which lies continually before us? The visible Order and Regularity of Things are inconceivable, if *(k)* *God ruleth not in Jacob, and unto the Ends of the Earth*: Yet, daily Occurrences compel us astonished to confess, that His *(l)* *Way is in the Sea, and His Path in the great Waters, and that His Footsteps are not known*. Just so, though Revelation is clear

(i) John 1. 3.
27. 19.

(k) Psal. 59. 13.

(l) Psalm

and exprefs, the Subject, too fublime for our Faculties, foars *far above out of our Sight*. —Yet Reason is not faithlefs. Where Falshood appears, Affent, as obferved before, is impoffible. Where it is not evident, the Mind is in a pendulous State; if on the other Hand it does not perceive the Truth of a Propofition. But, though *thick Darknefs* thus intercepts the View of Man, yet if God, who *knoweth all Things*, declareth the *Truth in a Myftery*, Reason humbly acquiefces, and firmly credits the infallible Authority.—I fhall not affect to entertain you with the Reafons, why the Deity may be fupposed thus to *bide*, as it were, Himfelf, and His Difpenfations from us: Whether the Cafe be, that more ample Discoveries might overwhelm our Faculties, or anticipate the Progreflion referved for another State. Be this as it will: It may calm our eager Enquiries to confider, that Virtue, not Knowledge, is the Task of Man; and that a due Portion of the one, will raife us to fuch a Degree of the other, as is too great and *wonderful* for us to *attain* here. Every Thing conducive to this End lies plain and even to the moft ordinary Capacity. The Sacred Volume unfolds every Rule *pertaining to Life, and Godlinefs*. *The*

Wisdom unto Salvation is inscribed in such Characters, that *he who runs may read* them. —Of the *Depths* both of natural, and supernatural Knowledge, it may be affirmed, that (m) *God understandeth the Way thereof, and He knoweth the Place thereof.* This is not the Province of Man: To him He saith, (n) *The Fear of the Lord, that is Wisdom, and to depart from Evil is Understanding.*

But to return. The Rules of Revelation being, general must be applied to particular Actions by common Judgment. The Nature of Things will not allow the Specification of all possible Cases. So surrounded with variety of Circumstances are the Lives of every Individual, that, if they should be stated, and they *could* be stated only by *the Finger of God, the World itself could not contain the Books that should be written.* Thus, *Temperance* and *Sobriety* are eminent Branches of Duty. But, as a Course of Life compatible with these Virtues in one Man, may, through Difference of Constitution, or other Accidents, be criminal in another; so, Attention and Observation are requisite to fix, in such Case, the Limits of Duty. *Charity* is the great Commandment in the Law of Christ:

(m) Job 28. 23. (n) 28.

Yet,

Yet, this needs not only the Incitement of Sense to quicken Compassion, but the Restraint of Judgment, lest Benevolence degenerate into Weakness. What should we think of the Man, who, mindful of the Precept of incessant Prayer, should deem himself engaged to spend every Moment of his Life upon his Knees? Most certainly, that he wanted *Prudence* to cool the Ardour of Devotion, and to teach him, that this Command was fulfilled by a constant habitual Preparation, and a frequent actual Discharge, when Time and Place allowed, and other Instances of Duty did not interfere.

But what need of expatiating farther on the use of Reason, when they, who in Words decry, in Fact acknowledge it? For, to what Principle in Human Nature do these spiritual Men apply themselves to work Conversions, but to carnal Reason; to which, however disparaged, or to Nothing, they must be understood to submit their Appeals. In short, —to renounce Intelligence, because we enjoy the Light of the Gospel, is just as absurd as it would be to extinguish our Eyes, because we walk in the Mid-Day, in the Glory of the Sun.

But,

But, lest any one should *boast* of Understanding, and give it a Perfection foreign to it,—it must be remembered, that it is *a Faculty only*, capable indeed of Growth and Refinement, yet liable too to rust in Inaction, and subject to Corruption. Experience has sadly verified, that these were but the too natural Events, shortly after the Monster Sin reared it's Head, and depraved the Wills of Men. They soon *(o)* *became vain in their Imaginations*, intermixing most erroneous with true Notions of the Divine Nature, and sunk, by Degrees, into the most shameful Idolatry, and barbarous Superstition. So that, in few Ages, the *Multitude* of Men too nearly resembled Elymas, whose Eyes once enjoyed the Blessing of Sight, but, at the Word of the Apostle, *(p)* *there fell on him a Mist, and a Darkness; and he went about, seeking some to lead him by the Hand*. At different Periods, and in distant Countries, God raises up wise Men, and Prophets, to remove the Scales from their Eyes; and at length he sends his Son, to restore corrupted Truth, and re-enlighten the World with a clear Representation of his Nature, Worship, and Service.

(o) Rom. I. 21.

(p) Acts 13. 11.

Immorality treads close upon the Heels of Irreligion. The Sacred Historian soon informs us, that (q) *all Flesh had corrupted his Way upon the Earth*: And the (r) Apostle gives a terrible Description of the Wickedness of those Times in which the Gospel appeared.—And how could the contrary be expected? When Reason lay neglected, or was unheard, in vain did the Professors of Wisdom deliver wholesome Precepts, and sage Counsels: In vain did they speak the Praise, or delineate the Beauty of Virtue,—or even urge Happiness as it's inseparable Attendant.—The Torrent of Corruption was only to be stopped by the Interposition of Heaven.—The divine Reformer therefore descends,—enforces the Observance of his Laws by the most awful Sanctions,—and, with a sovereign Authority, commands us to *cleanse ourselves from all Filthiness of Flesh and Spirit*,—and to *abstain from all Appearance of Evil*,—to *add to Faith Virtue, Knowledge, Temperance, Patience, and Charity*;—to rise through the several Degrees of Perfection, till the whole Man is adorned with moral Beauty. The antient Philosophers have exhibited a Sketch, the Out-lines, with the dead Colouring of Vir-

(q) Gen. 6. 12.

(r) Rom. 1. 21, &c.

tue : A more perfect Artist has added the fine Strokes, and delicate Touches ; and, by a most exquisite Finishing, has given Life and Grace to the whole Picture.

Why should I mention, that Reason is indebted to Revelation for raising her *languid Hope* into an *absolute Certainty* of the Efficacy of Repentance, and the Aid of Heaven. The Heathen strives to quiet his Conscience, and appease the Deity, by Purifications, Sacrifices, and sundry Kinds of superstitious Observances : But, hearing no *Answer of Peace*, his Mind is *like the troubled Sea*, continually agitated by Hope and Fear. But the Christian, upon the Terms of Faith in a Saviour, and Repentance towards God, is assured of the Remission of Sins ; and, in the clear Prospect of Forgiveness, may (*s*) *rejoice with Joy unspeakable, and full of Glory*. — Nay farther, his natural Impotence is strengthened from above : *The Armour of God* enables him to sustain every Pressure, to repel every Temptation, to subdue every Corruption. Where Nature would fail, Grace is victorious. She brings her Champion out of every Conflict *more than Conqueror*, and

(*s*) 1 Pet. I. 8.

enables him finally to *triumph over the Devil, the World, and the Flesh.*

But I must not pass over in Silence, that however strong the Suggestions of Nature and Reason are, that there will be a *future State*, yet their Powers cannot *infallibly* discover that most important, and most comfortable Truth to every good Man,—that he will live *for ever* in Regions beyond the Grave. The State of the World demonstrates, that his *Hope is not in this Life only.* But are fond Desires, are ardent Longings, are plausible Conjectures strong enough to work a solid Conviction of an *Eternity* hereafter? And, so swift is every Portion of Duration, so dark and full of Horror is the View of Extinction, even at the most lengthened Distance, that the gloomy Thought, the dismal Expectation, must disturb every intermediate Enjoyment, damp every Pleasure, and diminish even the Bliss of Heaven. What *glad Tidings* then are those, which *bring Life and Immortality to Light*;—which declare Man's *Title* to it;—which represent the *Nature* of this eternal State, as surpassing all the Powers of Thought, and Language;—and even it's *Degrees* of Happiness urging him to excel in Virtue, by describing the Saints above out-

shining each other according to their Attainments here, as *(t)* *one Star differeth from another Star in Glory.*

To conclude : ---Reason cultivated, and consulted, leads Man, by necessary Steps, to the Maker of all Things ; and teaches him to expect and embrace a Declaration of his Will. If such a Declaration is proposed, it examines whether it brings with it the Impress of the Deity ;—not admitting it in the Dark, lest the Alcoran take place of the Gospel ;—nor yet capriciously casting its words behind it, *(u)* *lest haply it be found even to fight against God* ;—asking such Proof as may convince the Understanding, but not requiring more evidence than the Nature of the Thing will admit of. The divine claim confirmed, it applies itself with Modesty and Impartiality to know the *Doctrines* which *be of God* ;—not starting, because it comprehends not some Things in his Word, when in his Works every Thing is a Mystery ;—not expecting to gratify a vain Curiosity in Points not necessary, nay, at present, as impossible to be known, as the Nature of Colours by a Man who is born blind, and thereby betraying it's

(t) 1 Cor. 15. 41.

(u) Acts 5. 39.

Weakness, Folly and Presumption.—Glad to find it's Infirmities healed and it's Defects supplied, it's Errors prevented or rectified, it's Fears quelled or removed, and it's Hopes raised and extended;—it labours with all Diligence to hold it's Supremacy over the Affections, and to observe the Precepts of Heaven;—waiting with Patience for cloſer Views, and clearer Perceptions, till that great *Change cometh*, when this and every Power of the Mind may expand, or be enlarged, and Faith will be ſwallowed up in Viſion.

In a Word:—Reason ſuſtains, confirms and explains Religion;—which, in it's Turn, ſuccours, improves, and embellishes Reason. —*Let both, therefore, grow together until the Harveſt.* When our Lord ſhall come and reckon with us, he will require the Uſe of both theſe Talents. He who faithfully negotiates with them, will thereby ſecure to himſelf the Approbation and Reward of his Maſter: Whiſt he who *hides* either of them *in the Earth*, will ſubject himſelf to the tremendous Sentence of *the unprofitable Servant*. When God ſhall (x) return, and diſcern between him that ſerveth him, and him

(x) Mat. 3. 18.

that serveth him not,—(y) the Wise shall inherit Glory, but Shame shall be the Promotion of Fools.

(y) Prov. 3. 35.

THE END.





UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

REC'D LD-URT

JUL 17 1985

Form L9-50m-7,'54 (5990) 444

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

BX Shaw -
5133 The use and
S53u office

THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 000 093 729 2

BX
5133
S53u

